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AUTHOR	Farr, Roger
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ABSTRACT

To serve the function of assessment, the language arts portfolio should be a record of a student's literacy development--a kind of window on the skills and strategies the student uses in reading and writing. Portfolio collections can form the foundation for teacher-student conferences, a vital component of portfolio assessment. The use of portfolios has gained momentum as curriculum experts have called for assessments that include a variety of work samples and have asked that teachers confer with each student about his/her literacy development. Language arts portfolio assessments should: (1) have value to both teachers and students beyond the assessment information; (2) require students to construct responses rather than recognize correct answers; (3) require students to apply their knowledge; (4) pose problems requiring use of multiple resources; and (5) present students with tasks that have a realistic focus. (RS)

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Clearinghouse on Reading and Communication Skills EDO-CS-91-09

Indiana University
2805 E. 10th St., Suite 150
D66
Bloomington, IN 47408-2698
(812) 855-5847

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Portfolios: Assessment in Language Arts

by Roger Farr

Portfolios are used in various professions to gather typical or exemplary samples of performance. Stockbrokers talk about a client's portfolio; art students assemble a portfolio for an art class or a job interview; people in advertising, publishing, or sales carry portfolios to business meetings. The general purpose is to collect and display an array of materials that has been gathered or produced (Farr, 1990; Olson, 1991).

The portfolios, if defined as collections of work stored in folders over a period of time, will have little value either to students or teachers. To be of use, careful consideration needs to be given to what goes into a portfolio, the process of selection, and how the information is to be used (Krest, 1990; Valencia, 1990). If this is not done, then the portfolio may become little more than a resource file.

Portfolios Serve Multiple Purposes

Many approaches have been suggested for developing language arts portfolios. The one common element in all of the approaches is that portfolios are places to collect samples of a student's work. Whether these samples include typical or best work, whether they include reading and writing, and whether traditional assessments are added to the portfolios are all issues that need to be carefully considered. Other concerns have to do with the assessment of the materials that are collected, the ownership of the portfolios, and whether portfolios are used for both product and product assessment (Farr, 1990; Johns, 1990; Olson, 1991).

To serve the function of assessment, the language arts portfolio should be a record of a student's literacy development—a kind of window on the skills and strategies the student uses in reading and writing. A student's portfolio should be the basis for the teacher's constructive feedback. When portfolios are developed over an extended time period as an integral part of classroom instruction, they become valuable assets for planning both within the classroom and on a school-wide basis. When information is gathered consistently, the teacher is able to construct an organized, ongoing, and descriptive picture of the learning that is taking place. The portfolio draws on the everyday experiences of the students and reflects the reading and writing that a student has done in a variety of literacy contexts (Valencia, *et al*, 1990).

Roger Farr , Professor of Language Education at Indiana University, is an Associate Director of ERIC/RCS.

The best guides for selecting work to include in a language arts portfolio are these: What does this literacy activity tell me about this student as a reader and a writer? Will this information add to what is already known? How does this information demonstrate change?

Portfolio collections can form the foundation for teacher-student conferences, a vital component of portfolio assessment. A conference is an interaction between the teacher and the student, and it is through conferences that the students gain insights into how they operate as readers and writers. Conferences support learners in taking risks with, and responsibility for, their learning. Through conferencing, students are encouraged to share what they know and understand about the processes of reading and writing. It is also a time for them to reflect on their participation in literacy tasks. Portfolio assessment is an appropriate means of recognizing the connection between reading and writing.

Portfolios Address Language Arts Goals

The use of portfolios for assessment is not a new concept. However, the idea has gained momentum as curriculum experts have called for assessments that include a variety of work samples and have asked that teachers confer with each student about his/her literacy development.

In the last few years, both the goals and instructional approaches to language arts have changed. New curriculum designs advocate instructional approaches that place an emphasis on:

- an integration of all aspects of language arts including reading, writing, listening, and speaking;
- a focus on the processes of constructing meaning;
- the use of literature that inspires and motivates readers;
- an emphasis on problem solving and higher-order thinking skills; and
- the use of collaboration and group work as an essential component of learning.

For example, integrated language arts instruction is now the accepted model in many schools in the country (Cal. Dept. of Education, 1987). Integrated language arts instruction for most of these schools means that there are no longer separate reading and language arts instructional periods—and often that

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language skills are also taught when students are learning science and social studies.

Integration also means that reading and writing are not broken into separate objectives to be taught, practiced, and mastered one at a time. Rather, it means that skills are taught as they are needed as part of a total behavior. Discussion preceding the reading of a selection helps to bring a reader's knowledge to bear on what he/she is about to read. At the same time the verbal exchange of ideas fosters speaking and listening skills. Despite the discussions of the importance of integrating all aspects of language arts instruction, it is the teaching of reading and writing that has produced the most obvious integration. Thus, a portfolio containing integrated reading and writing work samples provides a valuable assessment tool.

Portfolios as Authentic Assessments

One of the key issues in the development of portfolios concerns the kinds of structured assessment activities that should be included in them. Many curriculum and assessment specialists have been calling for the development of performance or authentic assessments (Stiggins, 1987; Wiggins, 1989). Performance assessments have been developed and used in the business world and in various professions for some time. Performance assessment is nothing more than the development of an activity that actually represents the task to be performed on the job—or the total behavior that is the goal of instruction. Language arts portfolio assessments should:

- **have value to both teachers and students beyond the assessment information provided by the test**. The tests should be so much like good instruction that a teacher would want to administer the test for its instructional value even if there was no assessment information provided. Value beyond assessment means tests will take no instructional time since the test is good instruction.
- **require students to construct responses rather than merely recognizing correct answers**. Perhaps the greatest concern with multiple-choice tests is that students are not required to develop responses. Rather, they merely have to select an answer choice from several that have already been constructed for them. Educators have long recognized that it is a far different matter to write a complete sentence with correct punctuation than it is to answer a question that asks which of four punctuation marks should be placed at the end of a sentence.
- **require students to apply their knowledge**. Many tests provide students with a structure for the expected answers. Performance assessment is open-ended and allows students to apply their knowledge. Student responses to performance assessment should reveal ability to understand a problem and apply his/her knowledge and skills. This means, of course, that a variety of responses will be acceptable.
- **pose problems for students for which they have to use multiple resources**. The solution to real problems necessitates the use of multiple resources. The writing of a report, for example, is based on the use of various source materials, reference aids, and the writer's background knowledge. Assessments which attempt to replicate those situations will provide information about students' abilities to use multiple sources. Such assessments should also determine if students are able to select pertinent information from the available resources and put the selected information together in a way that solves the problem posed by the assessment.
- **present students with tasks that have a realistic focus**. Tests should look like the tasks that students have to perform in every-day life and should focus on developing responses to realistic situations. Tests often ask only for right answers. Even when tests ask for written responses, the questions posed are "teacher-type questions" that have as their goal an assessment as to whether students have a basic understanding of a story (e.g., main events, compare and contrast). A question with a more realistic focus might ask students to write a letter to a story character suggesting how that character might deal with a problem. This presents a realistic focus to which a student can respond, and the responses will reveal how the student has understood the materials on which the response is based.

Taken together, the general attributes of performance assessment and the specific goals of portfolios represent an integrated approach for language arts assessment. Since the contents of the portfolio are generated by the student, may be typical or exemplary examples, and require continuous evaluation of reading and writing, students are actively engaged in their own growth and development as language users.

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